

Benefits of Teacher Modeling of Reading and Literature Discussion Groups in a Fifth-Grade Classroom

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Abstract

In an attempt to incorporate research-based strategies including teacher modeling of reading and literature discussion groups into a fifth-grade reading curriculum, a teacher finds her students in a small, southwest town very receptive. This teacher research project involved reading with students while they were reading, as well as reading aloud to students as a regular part of reading instruction. Students also benefited from participation in literature discussion groups centered on a book of their choice. Positive effects on attitudes, reading behaviors, and progress in reading resulted.

Problem Context and Rationale

David (pseudonym) is a reluctant learner. Preferring art to any other subject, this fifth-grader has difficulty concentrating on other things—especially reading. He is always looking for the easy way out and rarely exceeds minimum requirements. David has met his Accelerated Reader goals a few times this year, but most of his testing was done in the last two weeks before the end of the term. Rushing to meet his goal, David chose short, low-point books and read them to test, not for enjoyment. Besides the novels we have read as a class, only one out of the 45 books David has read this year was worth over two points (the majority were picture books). David has never reread a book except to review for a test, and never reads books at home for pleasure. After reading *Harry Potter* over Christmas break, he has completed only one other chapter book, which took him over a month to complete. When asked how he feels about reading, David answered, “I don’t really like reading; sometimes I do.” He admits that he likes reading when the books are “funny” or “help you learn,” but he does not care for “a long book that’s not interesting.” On a response paper he wrote, “I won’t read it because there is no use to reading a book that [is] not interesting.” As characterized by the information described above, David’s overall attitude toward reading appears to be negative. While reflecting as to why David feels this way, I decided to watch him during silent reading time to see if his behavior revealed anything.

For five minutes one day in the beginning of February, I observed David’s actions during silent reading time. He was sitting in his desk at the back of the room just a few feet away from my desk and from the computer where students take the Accelerated Reader tests on their books. The book in his hands was *Ramona’s World* by Beverly Cleary, but he was not reading it. Instead, he was behaving in the same way as he did yesterday and everyday before that—with his eyes wandering around the room and his focus on his surroundings rather than his book. In the moments that followed, David demonstrated his lack of interest in his book by looking at the clock, and staring straight ahead or at the people around him. David also moved around in his seat excessively, shifting his position to rub his nose, scratch his back, fidget with his earring, or

stretch his arm out. He also divided his attention from his book in order to get out of his seat and get a tissue. Although I stopped observing him after just five minutes, I did note that during the hour-long reading time David read only six pages.

David's behavior during silent reading time suggests that he had difficulty focusing on his book. He lacked the motivation to move quickly through the pages and continue the story he began reading almost three weeks ago. Unfortunately, David is not the only one who is not excited about reading. While conducting student interviews, I was surprised to find that some of his peers also have negative views towards reading. I was anxious to help David and some of my other students develop a love for reading and begin to read longer, more challenging books. I wondered if a connection existed between negative attitudes toward reading and distracted behavior during silent reading time. I wondered if David does not enjoy reading because he does not comprehend the text, and if his negative attitude towards reading is interfering with his ability to focus on, understand, and appreciate books.

In my first attempt at formal teacher research, I explored the question: What happens when literature circles and modeling of reading are introduced into a fifth grade classroom? I was anxious to determine if my students' attitudes, reading behaviors and reading abilities would improve if I incorporated these research-based strategies of modeling reading and of holding literature discussion groups.

Literature Review

The first step to understanding and incorporating any new strategy is to educate oneself using the research available. While reading literature related to my question, I found scores of resources that interested me. From these articles and books, I received many insights related to my own research. I recognized many similarities between what I read and what I have witnessed with my class in the last few months while I incorporating literature circles and teacher modeling of reading into our reading curriculum.

One element of my research included reading aloud to my students daily. I chose as my text, *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt, a modern classic I believed would hold the interest of my class. I dedicated about twenty minutes of instructional time to this endeavor and hoped this activity would prove beneficial to my students. While I was taught in college that reading aloud is important, I was anxious to confirm this notion for myself by examining literature and noting what happened with my class as I read.

When researching the topic of reading-aloud to children, Jim Trelease is a name that frequented many articles and commentaries. In his book, *The Read Aloud Handbook*, Trelease (1979) shares with teachers, parents, and librarians the importance of reading aloud to children. He explains, "Reading aloud to children stimulates their interest, their emotional development, and their imagination," and "...awakens their desire to read, enlarges their lives, and provides a sense of purpose and identity for children" (p. 28). Trelease assures teachers that when they take class-time to read aloud they are not neglecting curriculum because "reading *is* the curriculum" (p. 37) and language is essential to learning and teaching. Reading-aloud also helps children to improve their verbal skills and become better listeners. He claims, "the more they hear other

people's words, the greater becomes their desire to share their own through conversation and writing" (p. 37).

At the conclusion of *Tuck Everlasting*, I gave the students in my class a list of hard decisions similar to those Winnie, the main character, had to make. In groups of four or five, students shared with one another their thoughts and opinions about the situations mentioned. I was amazed at how engaged all of the students were. When I suggested that they wrap up their discussions, people from every group moaned and begged for more time. What I saw that day confirmed Trelease's (1979) assertion that reading aloud "stimulates their interest, their emotional development, and their imagination" (p. 28). My students were truly engaged as evidenced by the lengthy class discussion that ensued.

Trelease (1979) also makes suggestions for having effective read-aloud sessions. Among these he mentions the importance of previewing a book before reading it aloud. This helps teachers to familiarize themselves with the subject and the author's style so they may read the book to the class with more confidence. He also suggests differing the length and subject matter of the reading materials (p. 66). While reading a story, a teacher should use ample expression, alternate her tone of voice to match different characters, and make adjustments to the pace in order to promote suspense. In order to help encourage reluctant readers, Trelease (1979) suggests, "paper, crayons, and pencils allow them to keep their hands busy while listening" (p. 67). Teachers should also arrange a time for the students to read by themselves daily. In addition, teachers need to lead by example and show students that they read for pleasure as well. While reading *Tuck Everlasting*, I had the opportunity to employ each of these suggestions. I read the book prior to reading it aloud to the class so that I would be prepared to read with confidence. I gave a voice to each character, and varied the pacing to build suspense. All students were required to have a pencil in their hands to visualize and draw what was happening in the story. Lastly, I began reading silently while students were reading to model enthusiasm for literature. Each of these suggestions proved valuable.

Another aspect of my research involved me reading silently with my students during their Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) time. For about 30 minutes of their hour-long reading time, I modeled silent reading. According to Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999), "perhaps the most influential teacher behavior to influence students' literacy development is personal reading, both in and out of school" (p. 81). They found that teachers who have positive attitudes toward books and reading were more likely to use recommended literacy instructional practice. Morrison, Jacobs, and Swinyard (1999) also suggest that teachers use the sustained silent reading time to read books themselves. Lastly, they submit that teachers when take the time to read regularly, they will work with children more effectively. As teachers read with their students, they become familiar with the books available to children. As I made a conscious effort to read with my students, I found this to be true. I was reading more children's books so I had more to recommend to them. Also, students often looked to see what I was reading and we shared in talking about our books.

Literature circles were another key element of my research. Brabham and Villaume (2000) answer commonly asked questions about literature circles and identify their importance in the classroom. Implementing literature circles is an important tool because they can help readers "take ownership of their reading and construct meaning in active and careful ways" (p. 278).

Despite varying group sizes, texts, and scaffolds, literature circles can be successful as students respond to one another in thoughtful, respectful ways. In my research each student chose a role such as Vocabulary Enricher, Illustrator, Discussion Director, Connector, Summarizer and Literary Luminary. As Brabham and Villaume (2000) explain, “Across all methods and routines for preparation, the important thing is that scaffolds are provided to promote active and thoughtful stances toward reading and position each reader as a major contributor to literature discussion” (p. 279). I found that when students were prepared with their individual roles, better discussions resulted with more participation.

Some other articles provided some general information about reading curriculum. Towle (2000) wrote one of these articles about holding a Readers’ Workshop. She outlines the elements of the workshop to be teacher sharing-time, focus lesson, state-of-the-class conference, self-selected reading and responding time, and student sharing time. Towle’s thoughts on self-selected reading directly related to my own research. This element of the Readers’ Workshop involves “self-selected reading; literature responses, such as projects, literature circles, or writing in a journal; and individual reading conferences” (Towle, 2000, p. 57). In order for students to select appropriate books, teachers need to be aware of each student’s independent reading level. I determined individual reading levels by using STAR Testing (an assessment used with the Reading Renaissance program), and by monitoring and adjusting level after each Accelerated Reader test. Knowing the book level of all my students enabled me to place them in literature discussion groups (Book Clubs), based on their choice and ability level. Towle (2000) also suggests that teachers organize their books according to reading level and genre, so that students can easily find appropriate books. Fortunately, this was already done in my room and I agree that this system saves time and prevents frustration.

One of the patterns I was focusing on during my research was any change in attitudes towards reading. In an article by Garrett (2002), I learned information about improving students’ attitudes towards reading. Garrett explains, “Teachers and principals have an enormous impact on the attitudes children develop toward reading” (p. 21) and “positive attitudes toward reading can be developed through careful planning” (p.22). He goes on to outline various activities to enhance attitudes toward reading. Those activities related to my research include the suggestions to determine the interests of children and find books to match, discuss with students the relevance of the reading tasks they do, involve everyone in the class discussions, develop a relationship of trust with the students, avoid making comparisons among children, and make groups dynamic to minimize differences among groups. The interest survey I passed out at the onset of my research was indeed helpful and helped me to learn what types of books I should focus on for the literature circles. Also, asking the students to come up with reasons why we were doing the literature roles helped them better understand why they were necessary.

Each of the articles as well as the book by Trelease (1979) provided relevant information about different aspects of my research. In reading about literature circles I had a better understanding of roles. The other articles provided insights into modeling reading silently and the effects teachers can have on the attitudes of their students. The most beneficial resource, however, was my reading of Trelease’s (1979) book on read-alouds.

Methodology

As briefly discussed above, my teacher research project centered on the question: What happens when literature circles and modeling of reading are introduced into a fifth grade classroom? For two months I incorporated these reading strategies and collected data in various ways. With a culturally and academically diverse reading class made up of 18 students, 11 boys and 7 girls, I began my research project by administering several pre-assessments relating to reading attitudes and interests, reading ability, and reading behaviors. I collected data through student surveys and interviews, student work and audiotapes of students reading (samples from before and after), and by maintaining a teacher journal (with ongoing student observations and personal reflections).

Teacher modeling of silent reading and reading aloud was the first component of my research. I began modeling these reading behaviors to my students. For at least 20 to 30 minutes each day I would read silently at the same time my students were reading. I then introduced the book *Tuck Everlasting*. Everyday after lunch I would read between one and three chapters aloud to my entire class, pausing at times to have them sketch what was happening in the story. When we completed *Tuck Everlasting*, I continued to read aloud from a variety of fiction and non-fiction picture books.

Students also chose books and participated in literature circles (Book Clubs, as we called them). This activity required selecting and collecting multiple copies of about seven different books, and then having the students write down their first, second, and third choices on sticky notes. Considering their choices, their current AR book levels, and the availability of the books, I put each student into a small group (Book Club). Students then met as a group a few times a week to discuss how many chapters to read each day and to assign roles to one another. The students then used SSR time to read from their Book Club book and complete their assigned roles including: Artful Artist, Literary Luminary, Discussion Director, Word Wizard, Vocabulary Enricher, Summarizer, and Connector. I met with each group two or three times over the subsequent two weeks and the students changed roles with each meeting.

In order to assess the changes that took place over the subsequent two months, I decided to collect data in three different areas. First, I wanted to see if my students' attitudes toward reading change. Second, I wanted to see if my students' behavior during our daily silent reading time was more focused. Lastly, I wanted to see if they improved academically in reading, as evidenced by an increase in book level and comprehension scores.

Prior to implementing the modeling and literature discussion groups, I administered a series of pre-assessments to my reading class. These included reading attitude and interest surveys, interviews, and recording students reading a fifth-grade passage. First, students, students responded to the question: "How do you feel about reading?" on individual plain, notebook paper. Students then completed a Reading Interests Survey. This survey presented different types of books, and students marked how they felt about that sort of book by putting a check next to a smiley-face, a neutral face, or a frowning-face. Another survey I used to assess changes in reading attitude was the Reading Attitude Survey, or what I refer to as the "Garfield Survey" because the choices for responses are all different expressions on this comic strip cat's

face. Students were asked questions about recreational and academic reading and they circled the Garfield picture that best represented how they felt. Interviews were another tool I used to collect information about my students' attitudes toward reading. I interviewed each of my students individually using Nancie Atwell's Reading Survey (1987) and wrote down exactly what they said. Among other things, the survey revealed information about reading strategies the students felt were important, what kind of access they have to books, which were their favorite authors, and how they decide what books to read. In addition to the surveys and interviews, I also recorded observations relating to attitude in my journal.

In order to assess the affect teacher modeling and literature discussion groups had on my fifth graders' academic reading ability, I printed Accelerated Reader weekly reports and monitored for growth in comprehension and book level. Recording my students reading a fifth grade passage from the *Qualitative Reading Inventory-3* (Leslie & Calwell, 2001) was another way I assessed their academic progress.

The last data collection involved observing reading behavior during our hour-long silent reading time each day. I documented students who were either on- or off-task, while considering the routine announcements that occurred. I used a checklist with coding to record students who were reading (R), distracted or off-task (D), doing a Book Study—a worksheet our principal requires each student to fill out prior to taking an AR test (B), or taking a test (T). This checklist has an area to put the code and an area to record additional observations. A place for interruptions is located at the bottom of the checklist, as well as a place to put totals for students reading (or otherwise engaged), and for those students who are distracted or off-task. This checklist replaced about four other versions that were more complicated and less useful. In my journal, I recorded additional observations, noting interruptions and reasons for distracted behaviors.

At the conclusion of the two months, I repeated the initial assessments relating to attitudes and interests, as well as the interviews and QRI Assessment. During the interview I also asked each student if they noticed that I was reading during the silent reading period and what they thought about that. I also asked the students about the last time an adult outside of class has read to them. Finally, I asked students if they thought I should do Book Clubs with my class next year.

Results

The students' attitudes toward reading overall did not change dramatically. From the initial survey when I asked students how they felt about reading I found that one student said she loved reading, eight said they liked it, seven sometimes liked it, and one student admitted to not liking to read. The same student, who did not like reading at the onset, expressed his same feelings at the conclusion of the study. Initially, nine students said that they liked it when the teacher reads aloud, five only like it sometimes, and two do not care for it at all. However, in the final interview all students said either "yes" or "sometimes" when asked if they liked to have the teacher read to them.

The Reading Interest Survey also did not reveal major changes in reading interests. After they completed the pre-assessment survey, I tallied the responses and recorded the results. Out of 418 responses, 198 voted for the smiley-face, 127 were neutral, and 93 were for the frowning face. In other words, about 47% of the votes were positive, about 30% were neutral, and about 22% were negative. At the conclusion of the study, I found that more boys picked the frowning face.

The tape recordings of the fifth grade passages from the Qualitative Reading Inventory-3 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001) showed that the majority of the students recorded decreased in their words per minute and increased in their miscues after the two months. As demonstrated in the observations from my teacher journal, interruptions during silent reading time decreased and student on-task behavior increased.

Comparing the week ending on April 2nd with the week at the end of February before beginning my research, I learned that 12 of my 18 reading students increased in their book levels, while only 3 went down (the last three have not tested yet so I have no information on them at this time). As far as comprehension goes, six increased in percentages, but seven decreased in theirs. Two stayed the same and three had not tested yet. Since the project began, the average book level has increased by 0.5 (to 6.2), but the comprehension has gone down about three percent. At the conclusion of the study, the average book level remained at 6.2 and the number of students identified as at risk dropped by one. The average comprehension score, however, dropped by five percent.

Out of 80 points possible (indicating the best feelings toward each type of reading), my students' initial scores ranged from 27 to 72. As recorded in my journal, I discovered that of the 16 students surveyed, five students wrote that they "love" reading, eight "like" reading under some circumstances, two wrote that reading was "okay," and one student wrote about his dislike to be pressured to read. In the post-assessments the students' raw scores ranged from 31 to 68.

The surveys relating to the literature discussion groups revealed that students overall had a positive experience. All of the students but one had positive things to say about the books they read. The majority liked meeting with classmates to discuss the book. About half of the students did not care for the role booklets (where they recorded information about their chosen role), and one student even wrote, "I hate it." The favorite roles were the Artful Artist and the Discussion Director. The least favorite roles were the Vocabulary Enricher and the Literary Luminary. Many students listed "meeting to discuss the book with classmates" as the best thing about the groups. After the first Book Club, all but one student either liked their Book Club experience or thought it was "okay." However, more students responded negatively after the second book club experience. Those who maintained their positive view of Book Clubs mentioned liking to read the books, participating with the roles, and being introduced to new books.

Conclusions

Teacher research is valuable because it enables educators to better understand students and improve classroom practices. I found this to be true as I studied the effects of reading aloud and having literature discussion groups. The focus of my teacher research was on the problems I

was experiencing in my own classrooms. As Hubbard and Power (1999) explain, "...teacher research is a natural extension of good teaching. Observing students closely, analyzing their needs, and adjusting the curriculum to fit the needs of all students have always been important skills demonstrated by fine teachers" (p. 20). In other words, teacher research "makes one aware of what one does as a teacher" (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 20). By understanding patterns in language or interactions we can adjust our behaviors and expectations.

The most obvious patterns that emerged during my research dealt with reading behavior and attitudes towards books. I was amazed at what a difference reading with my class made on their silent reading behavior and my own attitudes about literature. One day about a month into my study I was observing my students during the silent reading period and wrote in my teacher journal, "I can't believe it! My students are all reading. I waited and waited for someone to look up or get out of their seat." When I read with my students they all noticed, as evidenced in post-assessment interviews. Many students commented that they liked me reading silently with them. One student said, "I like it because it seems like everyone's reading and they're doing their hardest to read." No one expressed negative feelings towards me reading.

However, I was shocked to discover through the reading interviews that not all of the students in my class appreciated me reading to them aloud. This caused me to think more about how to make it a more pleasant experience for those children who have negative feelings toward listening to me read. The majority of the students enjoyed me reading *Tuck Everlasting* to them, and were disappointed when it was time to do other things. This was very encouraging as a teacher. I especially felt like I was making a difference when I discovered that the great majority of my students were not being read to by anyone else. As I pondered the thought that if I chose not to model reading aloud to them, that most would not be read to at all, I felt even more motivation to continue.

Using literature discussion groups (Book Clubs) was another strategy that I feel benefited my students and our reading curriculum. Besides the occasional complaints about the role assignments, the majority of the students liked the Book Clubs and encouraged me to have Book Clubs with my next year's class. Interestingly, the three students that did not like the Book Clubs were not prepared with their roles when they met with their group, and did poorly on the test. Most students liked the groups and mentioned how it helped them to understand the book better.

Overall, I believe that my efforts to enhance the reading curriculum in my classroom by implementing teacher modeling of reading and literature discussion groups resulted in a positive experience. Through interviews and surveys I was able to get to know my students better as members of my reading class and as individuals aspiring to do great things. Some reluctant readers who participated in the literature discussion groups went on to read other books by the same authors and improved their attitudes toward reading. Also, the boy discussed at the onset of this article improved his attitude toward reading and became more focused during silent reading time. Seeing successes like these motivates me to continue asking questions about my teaching practices and search for ways to improve as an educator.

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